

## Outdoor Recreational Resources and Opportunities of the Northwest Sands

The NWS ecological landscape is rich in outdoor recreation activities. The landscape has a high percentage of forestland and the third highest surface water area of the ecological landscapes; creating an environment in which many different recreational opportunities can be pursued. 48.6% of the land is in some form of public ownership, allowing a great amount of space for recreation. This abundance and diversity of natural resources makes the Northwest Sands region a popular destination for people from around Wisconsin and the Midwest; especially the Twin Cities Metro Area of Minnesota.

Recreation along, on, and in Wisconsin's waters is important to the character and quality of life in the state and supports a vital tourism industry. In Burnett, Polk, Washburn and Barron counties this is especially true. Over 100,000 acres of lakes, 6,000 acres of flowages and 3,500 miles of inland shoreline, trout streams and canoe/kayak miles occur in these counties. The St. Croix National Scenic Riverway is a sizeable and significant river resource in Wisconsin. It crosses the Northwest Sands on its 154-mile path southward from the St. Croix Flowage, in Douglas County to its confluence with the Mississippi River at the southern edge of Pierce County. The St. Croix River was designated as a National Scenic Riverway in 1968 for its remarkable scenic, recreational and geologic values. It is one of the last undisturbed, large floodplain rivers in the upper Mississippi River System. The riverway is an unrivaled combination of natural and cultural resources and aesthetic and recreational values.

The recreational activities focused on in this planning process and presented in this section are nature-based and motorized activities that generally take place in natural or undeveloped settings. The information summarized in this section and gathered during the public input process will be used to determine how DNR properties, in conjunction with other public lands, can best meet the region's recreation needs. The department's master planning team must consider the purpose of the property and its natural resources when developing the objectives and prescriptions that shape the recreation components of the master plan.

### **Recreational Activities in the Northwest Sands**

The following summarizes outdoor recreational activities that occur on department properties in the Northwest Sands. The information for these summaries is sourced from several documents, including:

- Wisconsin DNR Ecological Landscapes Handbook
- Statewide Comprehensive Outdoor Recreation Plan (SCORP)
- Wisconsin Land Legacy Report
- 2017 DNR Recreation Opportunity Analysis (ROA) for Great Northwest Region
- Numerous DNR webpages

The regional master planning process is organized around the natural boundaries of ecological landscapes. However, the data and information sources used in examining the recreational resources often utilize political boundaries. The SCORP reports data for the entirety of Wisconsin. The recreation opportunity analysis for the Great Northwest region includes information for the counties of Ashland, Barron, Bayfield, Burnett, Douglas, Polk, Rusk, and Sawyer. The Northwest Sands ecological landscape consists of portions of Bayfield, Washburn, Burnett, Sawyer, Douglas, and



Polk counties. To the extent possible, this section addresses recreation opportunity in the NWS ecological landscape. When information is referring to a larger region that contains the NWS, it is noted as such.

To examine the recreational opportunities and challenges present in the NWS, this section organizes activities by type.

## **Water-based Activities**

### **Fishing**

Fishing is a popular activity in the Northwest Sands. The Great Northwest ROA noted fishing from a boat and shore fishing as among the most popular activities for the region. Fishing is a major draw for people visiting the region as non-resident fishing licenses outpace any other fishing or hunting license type in the counties of the Northwest Sands (EL Book). The array of water types, from flowages and natural lakes to small cold-water streams and large rivers, allows for all types of fishing in the NWS.

The department offers access through improved boat launches on many of its properties, and shore fishing is allowed on all department lands. The department has many fishery areas to protect the headwaters of streams and critical spawning habitat for fish. These areas are all open to shore fishing, but not all have boat access.

### **Canoeing/Kayaking**

Canoeing and kayaking opportunities are plentiful within the region. High quality water resources and a network of glacial watersheds throughout northern Wisconsin provide a variety of paddling experiences. The St. Croix, Namekagon, Totogatic, Flambeau and Bois Brule rivers vary in character, size, flow, and surrounding vegetation and land forms creating a unique experience on each.

Many department properties have canoe/kayak launches and several offer campsites that can only be accessed by paddling. Canoes and kayaks can be carried into waters from any department property. The Great Northwest ROA suggested Clam River Fishery Area may be able to introduce canoeing/kayaking options and Goose Lake Wildlife Area, Yellow Lake Statewide Habitat Area, Leader Lake Fishery Area, and the REM-Spooner Lake property may all be able to support expanded opportunities.

### **Motorboating**

The Great Northwest ROA reported motorboating to be an activity that people participate in at a higher rate in the northwest than other portions of Wisconsin. The department maintains standalone public access sites that can be used by both motorboats and canoes/kayaks and provides access at many properties designated for other purposes. Waterbodies that are not adjacent to department properties or without DNR-provided access points often have access available through other entities.

## **Trail-based Activities**

### **Hiking, walking, or running on trails**

Hiking or walking is the most popular recreational activity undertaken in Wisconsin (SCORP). Opportunities for hiking in the NWS include state and national trails, hunter walking trails, and numerous trails within the EL's state parks. In total, nearly 2,900 miles of recreational trail exist in the Northwest Sands, all of which allow hiking. The



North Country National Scenic Trail cuts through this region as part of its more than 4,000-mile journey from North Dakota's Lake Sakakawea State Park to Crown Point, New York and offers opportunities for day hiking trips or longer backpacking expeditions (DNR North Country Trail Site). Other hiking areas offer many opportunities for short trips.

Owing to the activity's popularity, the public has expressed a desire to have more hiking, walking, or running trails. In the survey conducted for the Great Northwest ROA, this was the largest area of need identified by respondents. All DNR lands, and most other public lands in the region, are open to hikers. However, the level of development of trails, if they exist, varies dramatically across properties.

Opportunities may exist to improve hunter walking access trails and other primitive or lightly developed trails on department properties. Additionally, the Great Northwest ROA identified many of the wildlife and fishery areas in the Northwest Sands as having potential to support additional walking, hiking, or running trails.

### **Bicycling**

Bicycling in the NWS is a diverse activity that encompasses road cycling, mountain/fat tire biking, and off-road trail riding. There are many bicycling opportunities on and off department properties in the NWS. All roads, except major highways, are open to bicycling and road cyclists readily take advantage of this opportunity. Off road and mountain biking facilities exist at Amsterdam Sloughs Wildlife Area, Crex Meadows Wildlife Area, Fish Lake Wildlife Area, Governor Knowles State Forest, and Brule River State Forest. Other opportunities exist near, but outside, the NWS such as the Chequamegon Area Mountain Biking Association (CAMBA) trail system.

Off road and mountain biking trails have been identified as an area of need by both the SCORP and the Great Northwest ROA. The Great Northwest ROA also identified paved bicycling trails, which can be utilized by road cyclists, as a priority. The Great Northwest ROA suggested Governor Knowles and Brule River State Forests may be able to accommodate additional mountain biking opportunities. Furthermore, the Great Northwest ROA suggested eight additional fishery areas may have potential to accommodate mountain biking trails.

### **Horseback Riding**

Horseback riding occurs on both public and private lands in the Northwest Sands. Due to the skill and cost needed to be involved, this is a specialized sport. The Great Northwest is not among the areas in the state where this activity is most popular. Of the 7% of respondents to the SCORP survey that indicated they participate in horseback riding, 55% indicated they do so 1-2 times per year.

The Brule River State Forest and Douglas County Forests offer horseback riding opportunities on designated trails. All department managed roads are open to horseback riding, and some township and county roads may also be open to horseback riding.

### **Cross-country skiing**

The 61 inches of snow the NWS receives annually helps make cross-country skiing a popular activity in the region. Residents of the Great Northwest ROA region participate in cross-country skiing at a higher rate than other regions of the state. Cross-country skiing is allowed on all department properties, though most participants prefer groomed trails. The Great Northwest ROA suggests Clam Lake Wildlife Area and many of the fisheries areas may be able to support the introduction of maintained cross-country ski trails on the property. It also suggests Governor Knowles and Brule River State Forests could potentially support an expanded network of trails.



## **Motorized trail activities**

Motorized trail-based recreation covers four similar, but distinct, activities: snowmobiling, ATV/UTV riding, four-wheel drive vehicle driving, and off-highway motorcycle riding. There are two-types of motorized access to department lands for these activities: access for street legal vehicles on roads maintained for public use; and trails and routes for motorized vehicles. Snowmobiles are somewhat unique in their seasonal nature and in that local and regional clubs maintain large networks of snowmobile trails that cross private lands. These regional trail networks usually use department lands primarily as connectors between long trail segments.

The Great Northwest region has the most existing opportunity for ATV/UTV riding compared to other recreational regions. However, there is little opportunity to expand beyond these opportunities. Motorized recreation opportunities already exist on several of the properties including Crex Meadows Wildlife Area, Fish Lake Wildlife Area, Sawyer Creek Fishery Area and the Wild Rivers State Trail. Bayfield and Douglas County Forests offer 152 miles of ATV trails combined and as well. ATVs are allowed on many town roads and street legal dual-sport motorcycles and 4WD vehicles are allowed on all department roads as well.

## **Non-Trail Activities that Take Place on Department Properties**

### **Gathering Wild Edibles**

Many Wisconsinites gather wild nuts, berries, plants, and mushrooms on public and private lands. In the SCORP survey, 37% of respondents indicated they gather wild edibles at some point during the year. All department properties are open to this activity.

### **Hunting and Trapping**

Hunting and trapping are among Wisconsin's most cherished traditions and most department properties are open to hunting, except for designated areas closed to hunting for all or part of the year. Given the large amount of public land, there is a large amount of hunting opportunity in the NWS. Many hunter walking trails exist on department properties, but there may be opportunity to add trails where access is poor.

The department has launched recruitment, retention, and reactivation (R3) efforts to bring additional hunters into the activity. R3 is not a series of events or one-time activities meant to promote the sports of hunting and fishing, but rather a need to continuously engage with and provide participants the opportunity to have high quality experiences while hunting and fishing. The master planning process can serve as a key feature in R3 efforts by creating a plan that, if properly implemented, ensures the department's properties can provide the high-quality experiences in hunting and fishing that keep participants in the sports. As the Great Northwest ROA noted, this is especially important in the NWS where hunting and fishing are already popular activities.

### **Wildlife Viewing, Outdoor Education and Interpretation**

The Northwest Sands' rolling barrens, rivers, and forests have abundant wildlife and create excellent opportunities for wildlife viewing, nature photography, and outdoor education. There are opportunities to take part in nature-based education at many of the properties. Several of the properties have developed facilities specifically for wildlife viewing; including Crex Meadows where visitors can watch the courtship rituals of sharp-tailed grouse from blinds. The Northwest Sands is the best ecological landscape in Wisconsin for visitors to learn about the globally-



important and fire-driven barrens ecosystem. Outdoor education and nature photography are facilitated by many DNR partners in the region.

### **Rock Climbing**

Rock climbing is a specialized sport that is more predominant in the southern portion of Wisconsin than the Northwest Sands. No department properties in the NWS currently support rock climbing and the Great Northwest ROA did not suggest any properties where it might be added.

### **Target Shooting – Archery and Firearms**

Target shooting by archery or firearm is a popular activity in the Great Northwest ROA region, with survey respondents indicating they take part in the activity at rates higher than the state average. The Great Northwest ROA identified firearms target shooting as a medium future need and archery as a low future need. These activities are accommodated on non-department public and private lands in the region. The Great Northwest ROA findings suggested there may be opportunity to add archery target shooting to several state parks and wildlife areas in the region. Opportunities for archery target shooting exist at Governor Knowles State Forest and have potential to be expanded. The Great Northwest ROA also suggested Bean Brook Fishery Area, Clam River Fishery Area, and the REM- Clam Lake Property may be able to support the introduction of firearm target shooting.

### **Camping**

Camping takes place in a variety of settings in the Northwest Sands, from primitive sites that are accessible only by hiking and offer few accommodations outside of a fire ring; to well-developed accessible sites with electrical hookups. Camping is not allowed on every property. Governor Knowles and Brule River State Forests offer the full range of camping opportunities and were identified by the Great Northwest ROA as having opportunity to expand developed and primitive campsites. The Great Northwest ROA also suggested many of the fishery areas may be able to support primitive camping facilities. Camping has been identified as a high priority for future master planning efforts by the Great Northwest ROA.

## **Additional Public Conservation Lands in the Superior Coastal Plain**

This planning process is intended for Wisconsin DNR owned properties. However, to properly examine the true scope of recreation activities in the Northwest Sands, department lands must be considered in the context of recreational opportunity on other public lands. Thus, this planning effort will consider available opportunity on lands open to the public that are not owned by DNR when addressing recreational challenges and opportunities in the Northwest Sands. Prominent public conservation lands in the NWS not included in this planning effort that help serve the public's recreational needs include:

### **State Trails in Northwest Sands Ecological Landscape**



The following [State Trails](#) are managed for public recreational uses by their respective counties of origin, through a partnership agreement with the DNR Parks and Recreation program.

1. [Gandy Dancer State Trail](#) Douglas, Burnett, & Polk counties
2. [Wild Rivers State Trail](#) Douglas, Washburn, & Barron counties
3. [North Country National Scenic Trail](#) Douglas & Bayfield counties

### **Water Trails in Northwest Sands Ecological Landscape**

[Water trails](#) in Wisconsin provide a network of access points, resting places and attractions for users of water craft on lakes and rivers. Those in the NWS include:

1. [Dogmatic Wild River](#)
2. [Saint Croix National Scenic Riverway](#)
3. [Namekagon River](#)
4. [Bois Brule River](#)

### **Conservation Easements in the Northwest Sands Ecological Landscape**

Conservation easements are typically small and do not have their own section in a master plan. However, in the Northwest Sands Ecological Landscape, there is a significant working forest conservation easement (~73,000 ac) that merits recognition. Wisconsin Stewardship Fund resources were utilized by the department, together with efforts by the nonprofit [The Conservation Fund](#) and others to protect this region for sustainable managed forest interests and to allow continued public recreation.

1. [Brule-St. Croix Legacy Forest](#) Wisconsin DNR purchased this easement from the [Lyme Timber Company](#) in two major transactions, to protect inholdings in Wisconsin's Brule-St. Croix Legacy Forest. This is a significant easement which consists of 72,957 acres, and protects them for managed forestry interests and to allow public recreation. The easement includes language that promotes a portion of the forested component to be managed in a rolling barrens application. Public recreation access is managed by the Lyme Timber Company.

### **County Properties in Northwest Sands Ecological Landscape**

County-owned lands within the NWS Ecological Landscape provide significant opportunities for public recreation that are complementary to state-owned (DNR) lands. Prominent examples of these public resources include:

#### County Forests & Parks

1. [Bayfield County Forestry & Parks](#)
2. [Douglas County Forestry, Parks & Recreation](#)
3. [Burnett County Forests & Parks](#)
4. [Washburn County Forestry \(& Recreation\)](#)

### **Federal Properties in Northwest Sands Ecological Landscape**



Federal forest and park lands offer opportunities for public recreation. In the NWS ecological landscape, these properties include:

1. [North Country National Scenic Trail](#) (National Park Service)
2. [St. Croix National Scenic Riverway](#) (National Park Service)

